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SUBJECT: IRAN'S ELECTION: ACADEMICS HIGHLIGHT IMPORTANCE OF FRIDAY
PRAYER DEMONSTRATIONS

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Regional Presence Office, DOS.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (S/NF) Summary: Five Iranian academics seeking visas in Dubai spoke with IRPO regarding the unfolding drama in Iran. They consider the demonstration coinciding with Supreme Leader Khamenei's Friday Prayers to be the most important rally yet because the demonstrators will have the opportunity show Khamenei the scale of the support for Mir Hossein Mousavi. The group thinks Khamenei receives limited information from his handlers. They also maintain that it is possible, even likely, for Khamenei to abandon Ahmadinejad in order to defuse the crisis. They think the demonstrators are targeting Ahmadinejad and not Khamenei, suggesting that the demonstrators are not as revolutionary as some media reports portray. They do not expect Mousavi to compromise, which points to a more protracted affair if their sense of Khamenei is wrong.

12. (S/NF) The four professors and one PhD student of philosophy and religion are from throughout Iran; two professors are from universities in Qom, one was from Mashhad, and another from Tehran. The student was also from Tehran. All spoke freely about the election and its aftermath. They all seemed to be Mousavi supporters and the PhD student had attended one of his demonstrations. They arrived in Dubai yesterday, June 17. End Summary.

Friday's Prayers a Critical Opportunity to Enlighten Khamenei

13. (S/NF) In Tehran, the academics believe that the protests are still gathering momentum and that the Friday demonstration to coincide with Khamenei's delivery of the Friday Prayers is the most important yet. They maintained Khamenei receives little information from his handlers and does not appreciate the scale of the support for Mousavi. (Note: Other IRPO contacts have also suggested that Khamenei is not fully aware of Mousavi's support.) They consider the opportunity for Mousavi's partisans to turn out en masse and show their support for Mousavi to be critical in convincing Khamenei to reverse course.

14. (S/NF) The academics said protests are occurring throughout

the country in larger urban areas. The IRIG can more easily control smaller cities and towns and, as such, there have not been many protests there. Qom has been relatively quieter; one of the Qom professors said the youth in Qom tend to support Ahmadinejad but whereas those older support Mousavi. When asked about the alleged strike to have taken place earlier this week, they appeared confused. One responded that Mousavi had not officially called for a strike and was not likely to do so because the Mousavi camp is advocating calmer, peaceful forms of resistance.

15. (S/NF) Word of mouth remains the demonstrators most effective means of communication. Of course, they said, Facebook and the internet are important, but telephones are working and people are talking. Paper messages, noting demonstrations, are also important.

Khamenei to Blink First?

16. (S/NF) The professors think the resolution of the situation will depend on the nature of Khamenei's compromise. They still consider it possible, even likely, for Khamenei to abandon Ahmadinejad. When asked who the protests are targeting, they responded that replacing Ahmadinejad remains the goal. Ahmadinejad, they said, has a degree of support among the religiously devout and the lower classes, but were Khamenei to withdraw his support, so too would many of the President's backers.

17. (S/NF) They do not anticipate, however, that Mousavi will compromise. They consider Mousavi to be a much stronger figure

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than former President Khatami and noted that during the 1980s, Mousavi was able to get the best of Khamenei. They now maintain that Mousavi is becoming very powerful.

18. (S/NF) None of the academics had heard or seen anything of Rafsanjani, though all assumed he was heavily involved behind the scenes. One of the professors described Rafsanjani as the only person who could control the movement. They also noted that Ahmadinejad's presidency was the result of the feud between Rafsanjani and Khamenei. The academics did not place much significance on the role of the clerics. They said even though most clerics were opposed to Ahmadinejad, they were also conservative, and beyond encouraging people to vote, were unlikely to intervene further in political matters. The academics also downplayed the rumored Assembly of Experts meeting, suggesting that there would not be an official meeting.

Applause for President Obama's Comments

19. (S/NF) All said that President Obama had struck the right balance in his comments on the protests and agree that the USG should allow Iranians to sort out the problem for themselves. They did not recommend changing course. At the same, they support USG condemnation of violence against demonstrators. (Note: They mentioned having heard that Voice of America was encouraging Iranians to take part in the evening roof-top chants of "Allah-u Akbar. ")

Comment:

¶10. (S/NF) The movement described by the academics seems less radical and less revolutionary than some accounts in the media portray the situation. If focusing on Ahmadinejad and not Khamenei, the demonstrators do not appear to seek the downfall of the Islamic Republic. The academics' sense that Mousavi did not call for a strike in the bazaars and is unlikely to do so also supports this notion. If true, this would give Khamenei more maneuvering room to defuse the situation. Khamenei could compromise without fatally wounding his own standing. Still, their sense that Khamenei is not an active player in the unfolding drama and is being misled by his handlers seems a touch naive and is clearly not shared by all involved. The Supreme Leader's rivals, Rafsanjani chief among them, are also more likely to see any compromise as a sign of weakness, as is the Supreme Leader. That, coupled with the academics' faith in Mousavi's fortitude, points to a more protracted affair. End comment.

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